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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest asserts that parent involvement is critical in facilitating children's development and achievement and in preventing and remedying educational and developmental problems. Topics briefly discussed are benefits to children and to parents of parent involvement, effective approaches to parent involvement, problems in involving parents, characteristics of successful parent involvement programs, and related cautions and concerns. Principles for implementing successful programs and sources of additional information are listed. (RH)

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ERIC Digest

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PARENTS AND SCHOOLS

Rhoda Becher

Parent involvement is critical in facilitating children's development and achievement and in preventing or remedying educational and developmental problems. Declining achievement scores, rising educational costs, and distrust of bureaucratic institutions are among the factors which have refocused attention on the rights, responsibilities, and impact of parents.

This Digest discusses benefits, approaches used, and problems encountered when parents are involved in the schools. Also listed are principles for implementing successful parent involvement programs.

Benefits to Children

Substantial evidence exists to show that children whose parents are involved in their schooling demonstrate advanced academic achievement and cognitive development (Andrews and others 1982; Henderson 1981; and Herman and Yeh 1980). The parent-child relationship is improved and parents more frequently participate in the child's activities. Parents also increase the number of contacts made with the school and their understanding of child development and the educational process. Another effect of parent-school cooperation is that parents become better teachers of their children at home and use more positive forms of reinforcement.

Effects of Parent Involvement

Research reports indicate that parents involved in child care and educational programs develop positive attitudes about themselves, increase self-confidence, and often enroll in programs to enhance their personal development. They also are more positive about school and school personnel than uninvolved parents (Herman and Yeh 1980), help to gather community support for educational programs, and become more active in other community activities.

Effective Approaches to Parent Involvement

Parent visits to the center, school, or classroom, parent meetings and workshops, and parent-teacher conferences are effective in encouraging parents' participation in their children's education. Written and verbal information from teachers on the program and the children's progress is also helpful (Herman and Yeh 1980; Meighan 1981; Seginer 1983).

Parents most enjoy participating in classroom activities, parent meetings, and policy planning sessions (McKinney 1980). They are most interested in meetings dealing with educational concerns or personal growth and development. Of less interest are meetings dealing with careers, job training, and social services. Somewhat surprisingly, social and fundraising activities were listed by parents as the least popular form of parent involvement.

Problems in Involving Parents

Researchers found that teachers are sometimes reluctant to encourage parent involvement because they

- Are uncertain about how to involve parents and still maintain their role as specialized "experts."
- Are uncertain about how to balance their concern for the group of children against a more personalized concern for each individual child, which they believe would be expected if parents were more involved (McPherson 1972).
- Believe parent involvement activities take too much planning time, turn responsibility for teaching over to parents, and are disruptive because parents do not know how to work with children.
- Are concerned that parents may use non-standard English or demonstrate other undesirable characteristics.
- Question whether parents will keep commitments, refrain from sharing confidential information, and avoid being overly critical.

On the other hand, parents complain that the bureaucracy of the schools discourages their involvement and their expression of concerns, complaints, and demands.

Characteristics of Successful Parent Involvement Programs

Despite difficulties, the proven benefits of parent participation result in continued interest in developing these programs. The following characteristics are a basis

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for developing, implementing, and evaluating successful parent involvement efforts. Included are assumptions about parents held by teachers and principals who operate successful programs and principles for implementing such programs.

Assumptions Made about Parents

Successful programs emphasize the contributions parents already make to their children's development and education. As a result, parents feel good about themselves and the program and are more willing to become actively involved. In the belief that parents can make additional contributions, successful programs help parents identify other skills they can share.

Parents have important perspectives on their children and can provide the teacher with information about their child's relationships, interests, and experiences outside the school or center. This information enhances the teacher's understanding of the child and contributes to more effective teaching.

Whereas parent-child relationships are personal, subjective, and long-term, teacher-child relationships are objective, impersonal, and short term. Successful programs recognize these differences when suggesting home activities and view processes and activities from the perspective of the parents rather than from that of the staff.

Successful programs recognize that most parents care about their children. They may feel it is more important to spend an evening at home than to attend a meeting only distantly concerned with their child. Staff also believe parents are interested in learning parenting, developmental, and educational techniques.

Effective programs understand that parents have many reasons for their involvement, that they may have good intentions, and that they may not understand how to help. The staff takes care to clearly state objectives and ways for parents to work well with their child.

Principles for Implementing Successful Programs

- Match goals, purposes, and activities.
- Realistically consider staff skills and available resources.
- Recognize variations in parents' skills.
- Respond to parent needs with flexible and creative program activities.
- Communicate expectations, roles, and responsibilities.
- Involve parents in decision making and explain administrative decisions to encourage parents to respond to decisions rationally.
- Expect problems but emphasize solutions. Because problems are anticipated, policies and procedures for resolving them are developed and communicated to parents. "Failure" is not blamed on the parents.
- Seek optimum versus maximum involvement. Parent involvement takes time, effort, and energy. If staff or parents become overextended, they may feel drained and resentful.

Cautions and Concerns

Responsiveness to the following concerns may help to justify increasing optimism that parent involvement can improve education and educational opportunities for children.

- Continuous and increased emphasis on the crucial role of parents in facilitating development, achievement, and education can place excessive pressure and responsibility on parents.
- Little attention is given to the role of the father.
- The focus of educational responsibility should not shift toward the parent so much that schools, programs, and teachers fail to examine the ways in which *they* might change to more fully enhance children's development, education, and achievement.
- Parent involvement programs may antagonize teachers who already feel overwhelmed by responsibilities beyond the direct instructional role.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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